

## LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH (LEA)

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The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is an effective method to help promote literacy development.

“The Language Experience Approach (LEA) to reading instruction is based on principles of learning that have been documented and discussed for many years (Huey, 1908; Smith, 1967). The experience-based chart stories described by Lillian Lamoreaux and Doris Lee (1943) and Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s (1963) work with Maori children in New Zealand are examples of how LEA helped students learn to read.”  
[http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/21108\\_Introduction\\_from\\_Nessel.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/21108_Introduction_from_Nessel.pdf)

**The basic premise of the method is that an effective way to help students learn to read is through their own words.** Students relate an experience and a scribe (teacher, tutor, parent or more knowledgeable student) writes down what the student(s) say. The transcription is then used as a literacy source. For example, students retell group experiences such as a field trip, a science experiment, a story, information in a streaming video, anything they learned together in class, or a project in which they all participated. Since LEA is based on personal experiences and are told by students, they provide highly meaningful and comprehensible reading materials. Applications of LEA can be used with many different kinds of activities and are applicable for all proficiency levels. This article refers to ELLs, but the strategy can be used with all learners in any language.

### LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH FOR BEGINNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLs)

The following are suggestions for ways to use LEA at the **individual** level for newcomers. Students need meaningful exposure to some comprehensible language prior to using LEA.

- LEA can be a follow-up activity for ELL beginners who participated in a Total Physical Response activity. They draw the activity and retell whatever they can. A scribe (teacher, volunteer, aide, tutor, or more knowledgeable student) records **exactly** what the student says, making no corrections. The scribe then reads whatever the student said. If ready, the student can read along during a rereading. These initial transcriptions may be only one or two words, but that is fine.
- A service provider uses visuals to introduce vocabulary within a context, draws a related experience and uses the picture to talk about it. For example, a tutor uses visuals to introduce vocabulary related to family, draws a picture of his/her own family, and then describes the picture. Students then draw their own pictures and tell whatever they can. Again the scribe records exactly what the student says and does the follow-up reading.
- After students understand the process, they draw pictures about experiences of their own choosing and do the follow-up retelling and reading.
- These transcriptions provide one very authentic record of oral language development for each student. Students date and keep them. At regular intervals representative transcriptions are selected and included in the student’s portfolio.
- Through student drawings, service providers will gain information about student experiences and interests. They can then write related sentences and select related visuals and books with colorful pictures and simple text.

## **INDIVIDUALS WITH MORE LANGUAGE FLUENCY**

- Students can be assigned to read their “retellings” several times to others. This is exciting practice for them and promotes reading fluency. Students often get very excited about doing this “homework” because they created it.
- If students decide they would like to “share” their work with others, you may introduce the idea of an “editor”. Be careful to edit in developmentally appropriate ways, often not focusing on every error, rather editing at the point of student readiness.
- If a student would like to “publish” the work, then using an editor would be an important part of the process. Students may like to publish a book for others to read, create a PowerPoint that summarizes their learning, or dictate an online review of a product, a public attraction, or a book. The more students are dictating for authentic purposes, the more they will see themselves as capable learners and the more excited they will be about learning to read what they wrote.
- As the student progresses, the teacher can incorporate a new technique for effective “writing” into each telling. For example, after modeling, the student would be asked to use the writing skill, technique or trait that was modeled by the teacher. When working with an individual, of course, the modeling would provide scaffolding based on student readiness.

## **ADAPTING LEA FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

The **Language Experience Approach** is a common methodology used with all students to teach reading through oral language. However, there are typical problems when using LEA with nonnative speakers. These problems are often present to some extent even with native speakers.

### **Common Problems and Suggestions for Group-generated LEA**

#### **Errors in the LEA Dictation**

Typically in the Language Experience Approach, the scribe records student language exactly as it is dictated. This is appropriate as a record of individual oral language development, as explained in the first section. However, to teach reading, it can be problematic with second language learners. Unlike native speakers, students with limited language proficiency will often dictate sentences with critical errors that would not be appropriate either as a model for oral language or as a reading resource.

#### **Suggested Modifications**

- Although error correction is often not suggested when using the LEA approach with native speakers, some correction is needed when using the strategy in a group setting with second language learners. The sentences generated by teams contain fewer errors than those suggested by students with the lowest English proficiency. In addition, team members also tend to help out the students who most need assistance when they are called on to share.
- As needed, the scribe can also unobtrusively make important corrections when writing the dictation. If a team member volunteers, “We goed to post office.” The teacher might say, “Yes, that’s right. We went to the post office,” and write the

sentence correctly. If another says, “We no have enough time,” the teacher responds, “We surely didn’t,” and writes, “We didn’t have enough time.”

- Another option is to write a rough draft version and then combine student and teacher editing before students make a copy. This would be appropriate when students are ready to make corrections and can easily copy a longer selection.
- To promote more language and greater accuracy in ESL classes, it helps to have students first brainstorm the most interesting events, categorize and sequence them, participate in drawing the events, share or ask for needed vocabulary, label pictures and copy related terms and phrases. Students participating in preview activities such as these have a list of related actions prior to the retelling. A focus on actions during a post office visit might include: went to the post office, bought a stamp, mailed a letter, talked to the clerk, filled out a change of address form, learned how to send a certified letter, saw postal workers sort mail, asked questions, and so forth. In addition to reducing errors, this preparation would also enable students to focus more on other writing strategies that promote effectiveness during the retelling. For example, a team would not be generating a non-essential sentence, such as, “We didn’t have enough time.”

### **Limited Reflection of Language Arts Standards**

The student-generated reading may not reflect effective or culturally appropriate strategies for telling a story, retelling an event, or teaching others new learning based on a common experience. The organizational structure for writing different genre is not universal. Often there are marked differences between ways to structure different writing tasks across cultures, and second language learners need very explicit guidance in the conventions of this culture.

It is typically difficult to teach English Language Learners effective writing strategies through language arts resources designed for native speakers. In addition to the possibility of a different organizational structure than would be customary for a similar task in diverse cultures, the context may be unfamiliar, and the language incomprehensible. Even in an ESL class using materials designed for English Language Learners, there is often such a range of learners that it is difficult to find whole class writing instruction that is effective for all learners.

### **Suggested Modifications**

Students tend to identify with LEA activities because they reflect their own experiences and are retold in their own words. Consequently, as soon as students are developmentally ready, teachers can use this method to provide explicit guidance in writing within a meaningful and comprehensible context. Developmental readiness depends on multiple factors such as: age, English language development, literacy levels, prior knowledge about the context, and levels of anxiety. Initially, it would be important for students to just feel comfortable suggesting sentences. However, when teams collaborate on the sentence suggestions, rather than just individuals contributing ideas, explicit guidance can be incorporated much more quickly. Suggestions include:

- Take pictures during an activity, for example a science experiment. Take extra pictures, and have the first task be to sequence the pictures and delete, non-essential pictures.
- Determine the most essential information prior to the retelling.
- Encourage students to retell directions in the correct sequence.
- Provide transition words or sentence prompts or frames as needed.
- After teaching basic elements of plot (starting with a visual story that reflect those elements) use the elements to help focus student retelling of a story. For example, “Who was the main character and what was the character doing when the story began?” “What happened that caused a problem?” “What were the consequences of the problem?” “How did the character solve the problem?” “How did the story end?”
- After students have been exposed to the concept of a big idea and supporting details, prompt them in a dictation. For example, students may collaborate in teams to state the main idea of a picture. They can then compare the sentences and collaborate as a class to come up with the best main idea sentence. Teams can suggest details that support the main idea. Students may be asked to eliminate any details that do not support the main idea and classify and order the supporting details prior to incorporating them into the class LEA selection.
- When retelling a learning experience, students are asked to recall what they did in sentence that summarizes the enduring understanding. “What is the deep enduring understanding we learned?” “What did we do to help us understand that idea?” “Are all the important details included?” “Is any sentence not needed?” “Can you think of a sentence that makes a good conclusion?”

### **Lack of Comprehension and Accuracy in the Writing Tasks**

If students are asked to read and copy the dictation only when the dictation is complete, many ELLs may not remember the meaning of all of the words. In addition, it is difficult for many younger students, not just ELLs, to attend closely to all of the details when copying a long selection. They may make numerous spelling and mechanical errors as well as lose their places.

Of course, copying would not be an appropriate follow-up activity if the students are not developmentally ready due to: language or literacy readiness, fine motor skills, or lack of English language development. It is very difficult for a student with limited proficiency to copy words and punctuation accurately, even when there is comprehension of the text. This is particularly true for students who are unfamiliar with the alphabet system or for whom the letter combinations are very dissimilar from the native language.

### **Suggested Modifications**

Even when the transcription is developmentally appropriate, many students, particularly young learners or students at the early stages of language development may still have difficulty copying the entire text after it is completed. Most students, even older and more advanced learners tend to become less attentive while the teacher is writing the sentence. Hence, except for early

grades when it may take them too long to copy, students could copy the text as the teacher records. The following provides some suggestions.

- Reuse visuals to help promote comprehension.
- If writing a retelling in a whole class setting, the teacher/aide should write the transcription facing the students: on a computer with the text projected, on a transparency, or with an opaque projector, rather than turning away from the students and writing on the board.  
Advantages include: increased teacher eye contact with students, greater visibility of the text for the students, and enhanced student attention. Avoid cursive writing until all students know cursive.
- Remind students to indent as needed.
- Remind students to capitalize by writing capitals with a different color.
- Compare end punctuation marks to stoplights and add periods in red indicating a stop. Highlight commas in yellow, for slow down.
- Ask students as a class to spell a word, thus providing a challenge to students who can easily copy while providing letter awareness to those that are just learning the letters.
- Write clearly and large enough for all to see. Making letter and word predictions in a new language is very difficult. Native speakers can often understand a word even when they cannot clearly read each letter.

### **Lack of Student Involvement**

In a multilevel class, such as a mainstream classroom, ELLs may not volunteer due to limited proficiency in English, increased anxiety in a new setting, and cultural customs. For all students, individual accountability and involvement is reduced when only one student at a time can suggest a sentence.

### **Suggested Modification**

Increase individual accountability and involvement in the LEA activity through the use of cooperative learning groups. Students in teams of 4 collaborate on each sentence they would like to contribute to the retelling, rather than having individuals contribute ideas. Each member is individually accountable for contributing the team's sentence. The teacher randomly has a student from each team stand. The designated team member from each team shares the team's collaborative sentence. At early stages of language development other team members may need to help out. A newcomer may be able to express an idea in his/her home language, and a bilingual classmate could share in English. The teacher might record each sentence and have students vote on the most effective sentence. It would be important for students to give rationale to support their choices. Often students will decide to choose elements from one sentence with that from another. At times, they will decide that one sentence would be great for the first sentence and another would be an effective second sentence. The teacher would not call on each team for every sentence, nor always record each sentence. Because this takes time, it would be best to use the procedure for only a few sentences. Then teams could collaborate with each other to complete the retelling. See the Small Group Variations For LEA below.

## SMALL GROUP VARIATIONS FOR LEA

Use small group variations for LEA to complete a class-generated retelling or when a whole-class retelling is not the most functional.

**A. The teacher works with a small group of students during writing workshop.**

The group with the teacher contributes to the story/retelling. In this small setting, the teacher may record student answers on large poster paper or on a computer. Younger students may not copy, but they could help with spelling and may take turns writing some of the words. If a child makes an error, other students could suggest the “booboo tape”. This suggestion is made in a fun way, and the same child would put a piece of tape over the error and fix it. Examples follow:

1. Each team shares statements of learning/a list related to a topic/a description of a picture/suggestions to solve a problem/contributions to a KWL chart, and so forth.
2. After writing the intro, each team contributes to a larger piece: one step in the process of planting seeds or conducting an experiment, one event in an historical sequence, support for a point of view, and so forth.
3. Seek to record student retellings for authentic purposes: Creation of a book or PowerPoint to share learning, a letter to a wounded warrior, senior citizen, community member, school staff personnel including janitors, bus drivers, and clerical staff; reviews of books, products, and so forth.

**B. For older learners, it may be more functional to have students use a variation of Team Jigsaw to work in teams to construct an assigned portion of a longer story or expository piece.** It is not easy to keep a whole class on task for a whole-class retelling, even when using groups to collaborate on a sentence (as described in the section on Lack of Student Involvement). A class might use the whole-class procedure described above to begin the writing, and then each team will contribute an assigned portion. (Be sure to see Cooperative Suggestions for Team-generated Writing below).

1. Teams each create a section of a class book about classroom procedures such as directions for the stations in the classroom or school procedures: opening a locker, gym rules, checking out a book from the library, using the cafeteria, asking for a pass, reporting an absence, and so forth.
2. Teams retell a story or content learning familiar to all students from a different perspective. For instance, in addition to having teams retell a the story from the perspective of one of the characters, some of the jigsaw pieces for the teams might be use of a different form to retell the events, for example: one team writes a letter written by one of the characters in the story to someone explaining what happened, another team writes a dialogue between one of the characters having a conversation about what happened, another writes a news article relating the event, and so forth.
3. Team members could work together to write a RAFT assignment, Role, Audience, Format, and Topic related to the content learned in class or the

content reflecting their team's research related to a theme studied in class.

4. Teams collaborate to contribute sentences to a whole-class introduction to a persuasive essay (or argument and evidence essay). Together they make a list of the support for the point of view (or related pro/con arguments). Then each team collaborates (as described in the next section) to develop one of the supporting ideas. Of course, for argument and evidence essays, each team would not only develop the support for the pro point of view, but would address related con arguments and cite evidence to support each. It would be important for the teacher to provide sentence frames to help promote sentence variety for introducing the arguments, supporting them, citing evidence, and so forth. Students would again collaborate as a class to refine transitions and write the conclusion.
5. Teams collaborate with the class to begin a lab report. Then each team does an assigned section. They return to the whole-class to share and complete the conclusion.
6. Each team writes one section of a newspaper to demonstrate learning related to a theme.
7. **Progress to a team-generated writing that was first modeled as a whole class LEA:** summary statements, a learning log, explanation of a reading strategy with text examples different than the class model, explanation of a resolution of a math problem, a student-generated word problem applying the math being learned, a particular paragraph type, and so forth. **After teams have collaborated on these types of writing assignments, partners and eventually individuals could perform similar writing tasks.**

## COOPERATIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR TEAM-GENERATED WRITING

The following provides the steps for implementing LEA within a group.

1. Be sure to select a writing task for the groups where all students have a **common frame of reference**. For example, it is not effective to ask them to make up a story. They could orally make-up a story, using a story frame and then collaborate to write it. All group members must have knowledge of the story/content about which they will be writing. If the writing task needs to be continued the following day, keep the team collaborative work in a folder in class, rather than letting a student keep it. Students can get the folder and begin work immediately the following day, and there are no problems due to a student absence.
2. **Give collaborative directions that promote engagement of ALL learners.**
  - All students record their idea of a good first sentence to get everyone engaged right away.

- They then take turns sharing their sentences and discuss them to reach consensus on one sentence, often a variation of two or more. One person records the team sentence, and others collaborate to help with spelling and punctuation.
  - **The recorder of the first sentence passes the paper to the right for a new recorder. That person will record a sentence generated orally, discussed and agreed upon by the other team members. The recorder cannot suggest a sentence!** S/he can ask questions to solicit a good sentence, “Could we use an action verb, a more interesting adjective?” etc. However, the decision on the sentence is up to those who are not currently the recorder. This prevents the more assertive students from taking over.
  - The paper is passed to the right for each new sentence. Typically, the students will ask the recorder to read what they have written so far. Hence, students are not only gaining practice in reading, but all students are really attending to the flow of the writing. A common problem for many student writers is that they don’t read what they have written.
  - Students will often get revision ideas as they go along, so it is important that they are either recording on a computer or skipping lines on a paper.
3. In addition to clear directions for the collaborative task, a rubric for self and peer assessment, either class-generated or provided by the teacher promotes focus on the desired elements of the process as well as the product. It is very beneficial if each team has a thesaurus and dictionaries that are appropriate for the learners (bilingual and ELL-friendly dictionaries, plus resources for sentence and/or paragraph frames.) Remember, in groups of four, three students would be available to support the language, spelling and mechanics used by the recorder.
  4. Each team needs a means for recording their “best” sentence(s) to share. Ex. A class wiki site or other means of sharing electronically either projected to the whole class or accessible via computers, I pads or Smart phones; a transparency to share on an overhead; a paper shown using an opaque projector, and so forth. It is helpful if the teacher circulates, providing feedback on some of the sentences that reflect great writing samples for their classmates.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP GRADING

It is usually most effective to use a rubric for teams to assess themselves based on the group process and inclusion of the writing components being modeled. The teacher can give similar feedback. However, it is important to focus primarily on the collaborative and learning process, rather than to grade the product. If a product grade is given, the more competent students tend to take over, rather than encouraging engagement of all learners. Hence, process descriptors should be included that focus on the attempts to engage others. Additional descriptors would focus on other behaviors that promote team success. Students will be assigned similar individual tasks in the future where they will be assessed individually on skills they practiced together in their teams.



3 Example for others	2 On track for growth	1 Still getting started
Team members were all engaged and encouraging each other.	Some team members were engaged and encouraging others.	One or two students took over. Almost no attempt was made to engage everyone.
Multiple resources were used to enhance vocabulary, sentence variety and mechanics.	Only one or two support resources were used.	The support resources were not used.
The team used their time very effectively.	For the most part, the team was on task. However, there were minor off-task behaviors.	The team had problems attending to and staying on-task. Minimal work was accomplished.

### **DIFFERENTIATED FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES**

Notice that the following activities are listed from the simplest to the most complex.

1. Add new vocabulary to a picture dictionary.
2. Reread and copy. Read on a tape.
3. Match sentences to pictures.
4. Sequence sentences.
5. Complete a cloze with a word bank.
6. Write your own account of the experience.
7. Write a related piece.
8. Use the modeling to write a similar piece about a different topic.

### **Ideas and Suggestions for Use of LEA**

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The following are some classroom activities that can be used to help develop literacy through personal experiences and dictation:

- student illustrated pictures
- students share “news” from home
- morning message: today’s date, several short messages/announcements related to the day
- predictions, procedures, results of a science experiment
- examining a picture/poster and discussing the characters, place, important objects, and actions represented in the picture
- math story problems

- retelling the events or important points of a story that has been read aloud (can be done with content area reading in social studies and science as well as with fiction)
- creating a story using a wordless picture book
- “how to” procedures in the classroom (e.g. procedures for checking out a book from the class library, for getting ready to go to recess or home, for playing a game, etc.)
- retelling events from a field trip or assembly
- steps followed for creating a project
- group letters thanking a parent for their help in the classroom

### **Language Experience Approach (LEA)**

Adapted from Margaret Moustafa and Joyce Penrose, The Reading Teacher, March 1985 by Lucia Morales and Jeanette Gordon, Illinois Resource Center

#### **Extension Activities for Student Dictations**

The activities are listed in the general order of difficulty. The first three would be appropriate for students who are developing literacy for the first time.

- **Word and/or letter “hunts”**(not to be confused with word searches and crossword puzzles): Teacher identifies word or letter (and sound) he/she would like students to recognize and asks students to find it in other locations of the chart story. Students circle, box in, underline, etc. words/letters that are the same.
- **Word matching:** Copy words on word cards and have students **match content words and/or function words** (prepositions, articles, nonconcrete verbs such as *is* and *will*) to words in the chart story.
- **Sentence matching:** Copy sentences and/or phrases that students dictated on sentence strips. Students **match sentence strips** to the chart story.
- **Word Banks:** Students **add words** they think they will need from the LEA text to a word box, plastic bag, or notebook.
- **Picture match:** Students match pictures to appropriate sentences.
- **Create a Class Book:** Assign a sentence from the chart story to each student and have him/her illustrate a picture for a class book.
- **Home Reading:** Make copies of the chart story for students to take home and read to family members. (Even if parents do not speak English, students will be motivated to tell them what the story is about.)
- **Penmanship:** Students copy the story/text and take it home to share with family members and/or for personal study.
- **Sentence sequencing:** Replicate sentences from the LEA transcript on sentence strips and mix up order. Students put the story/text back in order.
- **Sentence combining:** Replicate sentences from story on sentence strips. Cut sentences in half. Working in pairs, students **identify beginnings and ends of**

**sentences.** They decide which strips go together to **form complete sentences** from the story.

- **Cloze exercises:** Omit every seventh word or strategically omit words from the original dictated text. Students use contextual clues to read and guess omitted words. (Use for fluency and to assess reading comprehension. A word bank can be provided, if needed.)
- **Rewrite or revise:** Students rewrite the story/text, using a word bank if needed or revise the story/text to demonstrate other alternatives or to improve the text as it was dictated.